

Trials and Tribulations: A Story From Zootopia

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Category: Zootopia

Genre: Mystery, Romance

Language: English

Characters: B. Clawhauser, Chief Bogo, Judy H., Nick W.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-04-09 13:43:09

Updated: 2016-04-27 10:35:46

Packaged: 2016-04-27 20:14:44

Rating: M

Chapters: 12

Words: 16,365

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Nick and Judy have long since settled in as ZPD officers, but nothing stays the same for long. Careers develop, crimes occur, and feelings blossom in the mammal metropolis of Zootopia.

1. Chapter 1 - Patrol

Chapter One - **Patrol**

Downtown Zootopia, Tuesday, 1810_

The police cruiser slammed to a halt inches before entering the intersection. The driver of the vehicle, Officer Judy Hopps, winced as she imagined the possible headlines: "Rabbit Road Rage Kills Family of Four", or maybe "Callous Cop Carelessly Crushes Critters". She immediately resolved to pay closer attention for the rest of her shift.

She didn't have much time to mentally berate herself, however. As soon as the cruiser stopped, her partner, Nick, turned to her and spoke with a voice dripping with sarcasm. "You're a menace!" he exclaimed. Judy rolled her eyes and gave Nick her best glare and returned fire. "Fine, then you can drive. But do try your best not to murder any more fire hydrants." Nick clapped his hand to his chest in mock outrage. "You wound me! Besides, I seem to vividly remember a certain cotton-tailed partner of mine swearing to never discuss the fire hydrant incident." Judy's glare melted into an impish grin. "You brought it upon yourself, Nick. I am a menace, remember?"

Nick could only laugh along with Judy at the exchange. Their banter was an essential part of the job, and it had become routine in the year that they had spent on patrol together. But something was bothering Judy - she was trying her best to mask her thoughts, but Nick knew her better than anyone and could tell when something was amiss.

"Alright Carrots, you got me. Serious talk now - what's on your mind? You've been off all day, what gives?" Judy sighed and glanced at the intersection light - still red. Her sharp violet eyes shot next to the radio seated in the dashboard of the cruiser - it remained silent. With no escape from Nick's inquiry, she slowly started exhaling the jumble of thoughts that had been rattling around in her head since the morning. "Well, it's this thing... two things, technically. There have been some rumblings; I guess the chain of command is shaking up a bit. Some brass are retiring, so positions are opening up... including a Patrol Sergeant slot." Nick's eyes widened and an eager smile split across his face. "Alright, so what's the second half?"

The light finally turned green and Judy accelerated cautiously through the intersection before responding. "This is what I'm really interested in. Rumor has it that there are open positions in the Detective Division, but nothing has been posted yet. Right now I'm not sure which one I'd rather go for, or if I want to apply at all." As she finished speaking, Judy felt a weight lift from her shoulders - she hadn't noticed how preoccupied she had been with her thoughts. She stole a sidelong glance at Nick. "What do you think?"

Nick paused and absentmindedly scratched his neck as he stared through the windshield. "Car in front of us has expired tags. Want to stop him?" Judy glanced at her watch and grimaced. "Fifteen minutes left on shift. If we go over, you're buying me lunch all next week." Nick gave her a cocky grin and flipped the cruiser's lights on. The car in front of them, a small hatchback, began to pull over. Judy thumbed her radio and spoke clearly into her shoulder "One-Adam-Six, Nine-Sixty at Story and Maple". She paused for a moment, and heard Clawhauser's voice ring through her radio. "Copy One-Adam-Six".

Nick, meanwhile, began to type the hatchback's plate number into the car's computer. "4... G... F... I think you should go for it, by the way. You'd make a great detective, or a great Sergeant. I guess it just depends on whether you'd rather solve crime in a suit, or torture patrol officers." A dry chuckle escaped Judy. "Well when you put it like that... I am leaning towards being a detective, though. I like the idea of really getting into the grit of cases like we did with the Night Howlers. Patrol just isn't the same ballgame." Nick nodded in agreement.

The computer beeped. "Record is squeaky clean", said Nick. "Warning?" "Warning", Judy wearily replied. Both cars finally came to a stop, and the two officers exited in tandem, as they had hundreds - perhaps thousands - of times before. Both fox and bunny had long since mastered the fear that grips every cop on traffic stops - after all, there's never any telling who was behind the wheel, or what could happen if the encounter were to go south. But the trust that Nick and Judy had developed throughout the year was far stronger than the fear. Even without looking, each knew exactly where the other was and how the stop would play out. It was a bizarre, yet comforting dance - and neither Nick nor Judy would abide a different partner.

The officers rolled into the ZPD lot exactly one minute before the end of the shift. As Judy guided the car into the subterranean parking bay, she gave Nick a quick grin. "I could totally have made us late, by the way. I didn't HAVE to run that last yellow light. Enjoy basking in my mercy." Nick scoffed. "I don't buy it. I'm still

not entirely convinced you can tell time. Or read. Do they even have books in Bunnyburrow?" Judy's answer came in the form of a swift (but gentle) punch to Nick's left arm. "Ooooh, assaulting an officer. Does your form of mercy always come in the form of felonies? Or do you do misdemeanors too?" A second, slightly harder punch was Judy's response as she navigated the cruiser into an empty parking space. "Don't question my methods, Nick. They're too complex for you to understand, and I wouldn't want you to strain something by thinking too hard." The officers exited the car and loped toward the garage elevator - Nick fished out his pass key and carded them in. He hit the button for the ground floor and the elevator lurched as it began to rise.

"So now that we've stopped this horrible prey on predator violence -" he was interrupted as Judy punched him for a third time - "any thoughts? How long do you have to make up your mind?" The question immediately sobered Judy, who let out a deep sigh. "I don't know, a couple of weeks, maybe? There's number much notice for these things." She paused, and continued on quietly. "I don't want to accept a position that means losing you as a partner." Silence filled the elevator, which was momentarily penetrated by a high-pitched *DING* as the doors opened to the lobby. The ever-corpulent Clawhauser glimpsed his friends from his desk, and waved enthusiastically with a grin on his face that quickly dissolved into confusion as Nick closed the elevator doors.

As soon as the doors shut, Nick turned to Judy and began to speak, all traces of sarcasm now gone from his voice. "Judy, if you want to do it, just do it. Don't feel that you have to stick around on the bottom of the totem pole for me." Judy looked back up at Nick, and lost her train of thought. She had seen Nick drop his sardonic veneer on a number of occasions, but it never ceased to surprise her when she saw the real warmth behind his banter and cynicism. It was her favorite part of Nick - that pure compassion, that pure caring.

Though she'd rather drop dead than tell him that.

Just then, an idea came to Judy. "Okay then, what about this? Take the detective exam with me. If we both get tapped, we stay partners. If one or neither of us gets it, we stay in patrol. We stick together, no matter what" Nick paused, and then smiled. "I go where you go", he proclaimed, and opened the doors. "Ladies first", he said with a sweeping gesture towards the lobby. Judy pattered past him and headed towards the women's locker room as Nick slunk towards the men's.

Clawhauser watched silently, completely mystified.

2. Chapter 2 - Breakfast

Chapter Two - **Breakfast **

Nick's Apartment, The Next Thursday, 0800

The speaker of Nick's phone exploded in a fiery inferno of a thousand screeching banshees in mid-orgasm.

He violently flung himself up and grasped wildly for his phone -

after several heart-pounding seconds, he finally managed to kill the alarm. He flopped back down and lay prostrate for several minutes before reaching for his phone again. He slowly tapped out a text message.

Carrots, the next time you change my alarm to a Gazelle song I swear to God I will go savage and eat you.

The reply came shortly.

_LOL _

Breakfast? Want to go over the detective apps with you. Thinking Pancake House.

Nick's mood, soured prematurely by his phone's recent all-out assault on his ears (and musical sensibilities), immediately brightened. He relished any time he was able to spend with Judy off the clock, even if they were only talking about work. He just feltâ€¦| _bored_ when she wasn't around. He quickly tapped out a response:

Sounds great! Meet you in 30.

Nick hauled himself out of bed and lumbered towards the bathroom. His apartment was cozy and warmly decorated - it was a step down size-wise from his previous loft in the Rainforest District, but it was a five minute walk from the station, which meant that he could wake up twenty minutes before his shift and still be on time. When he explained his logic to Judy she rolled her eyes and called it laziness, but Nick preferred the term "tactical leasing".

Nick showered quickly and brushed his teeth while standing in front of a body-size hair dryer (expensive, but a time-saver - especially for mammals with thick fur). He emerged from the bathroom and opened his closet, eventually selecting a gaudy yellow Hawaiian shirt that clashed horrifically with his shiny red coat. He examined himself in the mirror, thinking of how much it would annoy Judy. He smiled and headed for the door.

The Overlook Pancake House fell into that strange breed of restaurant that was somehow wildly successful, but seemingly always empty. Everything about the place (including the employees) seemed worn and a little tattered, but perfectly functional. As he slouched through the door, Nick saw that Judy had already snagged their regular table. She looked up as Nick approached and winced. "You look like a tropical nightmare. I'm just going to pretend I don't know you." She raised her menu to hide Nick from her view. The garishly clad fox sidled into the remaining chair and winked at her. "Come on, I wear the exact same uniform four days a week. I've got to cut loose occasionally." Judy shook her head in mock hopelessness. "You're a lost cause, Wilde." "Takes one to know one, Carrots."

The two shared a warm glance, which was interrupted when a large stack of pancakes was flung unceremoniously onto the table by a neurotic-looking ocelot. "Thanks, Jeremy!" said Judy brightly. The ocelot only nodded and jerkily made his way to the back of the house. Nick's eyes followed the feline's twitchy path for a moment before zeroing in on his partner. The rabbit was clad in an aquamarine blouse, which blended pleasantly with her grey fur and purple eyes. Her gorgeous, perfect purple eyes.

"Nick, are you listening to a word I'm saying?" Judy asked irritably.

Nick's snap back to reality was almost audible. "Of course I am. But why don't you say it again, just in case", he said innocently. Judy, disarmed by Nick's unusual tone, faltered for a second before mentally retracing her steps.

"Okay, here's the deal: it looks like there are going to be four open Detective positions in our division, which is great news for us, because it increases our odds. The downside is that, based on purely anecdotal evidence, there appear to be at least fifteen officers gunning for those spots." Nick waved a paw dismissively. "Yeah, sure. But none of them solved the Night Howler case and jailed two mayors at the same time." Judy shot him with a disapproving glance, but he continued. "No, seriously! That case is going to bump us both to the top of the table. That plus our stellar records on patrol" - Judy glowed at that particular remark - "put us squarely in the category of 'badass'. All we have to do is pass the test and we're in."

As Nick continued to wax eloquent about the success of their partnership, Judy began to relax. The whole ordeal had been stressing her out, but just being with Nick was calming her down. Nick's endless confidence (which all too often bordered on cockiness) was simply contagious - the more optimistic Nick grew about their chances, the more possible their goal seemed.

Judy began to zone out slightly as Nick's monologue grew increasingly ridiculous. She loved the way he could take a stressful situation and turn it into one big joke. She also loved the way he casually let his body droop when he segued into talking big. It had driven her crazy, at first - his seeming lack of care. But in reality, it was his way of showing pride. He simply oozed confidence, and it worked well for him as an officer - it somehow immediately set suspects at ease. Judy took her eyes away from Nick's and let them drift downwards. God, his shirt was horrible. He probably did that just to drive her nuts. Her eyes came to rest on the tuft of cream-colored fur poking out from his collar - it looked an awful lot like the soft fur of her own tail, and wondered if it felt the same. It must be nice, to be that soft and fluffy all overâ€¦

"â€¦and all I'm saying is that we should have had a building named after us. Or a bathroom, at least. Maybe a urinal? I like the sound of 'The P. Wilde Dedicatory Urinal'." That was it. Judy finally collapsed into an uncontrollable heap of giggles.

Nick sank back into his chair feeling particularly pleased with himself. Reducing Judy to wild laughter was one of his simple joys in life, and it was task that he pursued almost constantly - especially when they spent time together outside of work. As Judy slowly regained her self control, Nick cast a hungry eye on the untouched stack of pancakes on the table. "We should probably start in on these before they get too cold. What'd you order?" Judy's breathing finally slowed down to a normal pace, and she peered at the plate. "Uhhhâ€¦ banana pancakes. Never tried them, but I'm looking forward to it."

The conversation stalled from there - both parties were too busy eating to continue talking. As the food in front of them slowly

vanished, Judy and Nick resumed talking in between mouthfuls. Judy was the first to break the silence. "Okay, I'm moving into my new place Friday afternoon, so it'll take me at least a day to get settled in. If you want, you can swing by Saturday and we can spend the day studying for the exam, which is Monday morning at ZPD." Nick thought for a moment, and swallowed. "Yeah, that works for me. I'll probably come over around noon, I have some errands to run in the morning."

Nick flagged down Jeremy for the check. The shifty Ocelot returned with the small bit of paper, his eyes darting nervously from Judy to Nick and back again. "I've got this one", said Judy as she placed a few bills on the table. "Thank you, Jeremy", she said sweetly to the waiter. Jeremy just nodded and scooped up the money before skittering away again. Nick once again kept an eye on the Ocelot. "I'm telling you Carrots, that guy is _shifty_." "Oh shush", Judy replied. "He's just shy, and you're just paranoid." Nick only grunted in response, and they both rose to leave.

They reached the door, and Judy turned to Nick. "I'll see you Saturday then", she said brightly. Nick smiled softly. "Looking forward to it, Carrots." They hugged - for just a second or so too long - and broke apart to tackle the rest of their day.

3. Chapter 3 - Scholars

Chapter Three - **Scholars**

_Judy's Apartment, Saturday, Noon-ish _

Nick double-checked the apartment number on his phone, then knocked on the door. He heard the pitter-patter of tiny feet rushing towards him, and then the door opened inward, revealing Judy. "Nick!" she exclaimed. "Come on in!"

Nick followed her through a narrow corridor that opened into a brightly lit living room. Judy had finished moving in, and appeared to have had a field day decorating her new apartment. A wide, black Lawson-style sofa took up space in the middle of the room, facing a rather large flat-screen television. A number of very comfortable-looking chairs and beanbags were scattered throughout the living room, a look that suggested the designer was used to having lots of bunnies needing a place to sit.

"Nice digs, Carrots!" Nick said appreciatively. "You really went all out on the furniture, huh?" He plopped down on the roomy sofa. Judy sat down delicately next to him. "Thanks! I meanâ€¦ I've been sitting on almost two year's worth of salary and I don't spend a whole lot, so I kind of splurged on the sofa. And the bed. And the television." Nick looked up and gave Judy a toothy grin. "Looks like it was money well splurged." Nick propped himself up on his elbows. "Okay, so what exactly do we need to know going into this test? I know a ton of it is going to be situationals and example cases, but is there anything more specific we should be looking at?" Judy frowned, but her ears remained pointed skyward, as often happened when she was thinking. "Well, none of the current detectives are talking. But I was able to borrow this from a detective in the Third Precinct that swears it helped him on the exam."

Judy rose from the couch and padded into the kitchen, when a heap of books lay haphazardly on a rickety dining table. She inspected them briefly, then extracted a large tome that was almost half her size. Nick was there in an instant to grab it for her, and looked at the title. "A Rookie's Guide to Modern Detective Work?" he recited dryly. "Well, this sounds like a truly energetic read. Absolutely groundbreaking." Judy sighed. "Nick, it'll _help._ Besides, this isn't really new stuff to either of us. Plenty of study and memorization at the academy, and four weeks isn't even close to six months." Nick sighed heavily. "Fine Carrots, you win this round. But one of these days we're going to do the fun kind of studying. The kind that involves music and drinks." Judy grinned playfully. "Who said this wasn't going to involve music and drinks?" "Hold up!" blurted Nick. "_I _get to choose the soundtrack. After that crap you pulled with my phone, I don't trust your musical tastes anymore." Judy nodded solemnly in acceptance.

The afternoon and evening seemed to melt away in a haze of buzzed laughter. The two aspiring detectives would make excellent progress for about fifteen minutes before their well-intended study session degenerated into recollections of past calls and outlandish impersonations of other ZPD officers. Eventually, as their energy began to diminish (along with Judy's admittedly formidable supply of alcohol), the two partners found themselves drowsily dozing on opposite ends of the couch as they drifted towards sleep.

Nick was the first to wake up. He cracked open his eyes, but quickly shut them - the sunlight pouring through the windows was a poor mix with his hangover. He attempted to lift his left paw to check his watch, but for some reason he wasn't able to move his arm. He looked down and his breath caught in his throat.

At some point during the night, he and Judy had become entwined on the couch. She lay face down, perpendicular across his torso, pinning his left arm, and her arms were wrapped around his tail. Nick's heart thumped in his chest - he and Judy had always respected each other's personal space, but this went far beyond any unspoken limitations they had set for themselves. As much as he enjoyed this unintentional snuggle session, Nick knew he had to extricate himself before Judy woke up and things got uncomfortable.

He had just started to wiggle his left arm free when Judy let out a loud snore and rolled off of the couch and onto the floor. She woke up on impact, and her first impression was a shocked (yet snickering) Nick. Judy narrowed her eyes, and her words were venom. "You help me up. _Right. Now._" Still snickering (though more out of relief than anything else), Nick clasped Judy's forearms and pulled her to her feet. "See?" said Nick. "I can occasionally be a gentleman." Judy let out a harsh bark of laughter. "Yeah, under duress, maybe! I need some water. We both need some water."

As Judy busied herself with the glasses, Nick thanked every deity he could think of for Judy's tumble. "_Perfect._" He thought to himself. "_That ended fine. Nothing is weird. Everything is okay. We're good!"_ Judy handed him a glass of cold water, which he downed in seconds. "Sorry, by the way", remarked Judy. Nick blinked. "Sorry for what, Carrots?" Judy shook her head and sheepishly continued "I generally try not to fall asleep on people, if I can help it."

It wasn't often that Judy saw Nick completely discombobulated, but

when she did, she committed those precious few moments to her permanent memory - and this episode was going right into the vault. The first (and last) time she'd seen that face on Nick was right after she enlisted the help of Mr. Big in their first case together. A smile spread widely across her face. "You make a pretty great pillow, you know."

Nick quickly regained a modicum of composure, but he was still thrown for a loop and was trying his best to recover. "Well, foxes are known for that, you know. In addition to being incredibly handsome and charming as a species."

"_Oh God."_ Thought Nick. _"Stereotyping yourself AND unintentionally flirting. Smooth. Now how do I end this without being weird?"_

"_Oh God." _ Thought Judy. _"I must have really embarrassed him. I'm a jerk. Great. Now how do I end this without being weird?"_

They both attempted to speak at the same time, but interrupted each other. Then it happened again.

And then Nick blurted out something that he didn't mean to say aloud at all.

"It was really nice."

His words hung in the air like a blimp in the Rainforest District. Judy and Nick were trying their hardest not to look each other in the eye, until Judy gathered all of her considerable willpower and raised her head.

"It really was."

The silence was deafening, and it seemed like the room was shrinking, shrinking into an impossibly small space with only enough room for the two of themâ€¦

The ring of Judy's cell phone split the tension open like an explosion.

"_Oh thank God."_ thought the pair simultaneously.

Judy glanced at the screen - it was Clawhauser. Judy swiped to answer, cleared her throat, and in her most professional voice greeted her friend.

"Hey Benjamin, what's up?"

"Hey Judy! Minor problem down at the station. We had a minor mix-up in the evidence lockers. Three different cases have been mixed up and they're not sure which evidence baggies belong to which caseâ€¦ Bogov wants you down here with Delgado and Stevens to identify everything, since you were all booked that evidence. I know it's your day off, but Bogov authorized OT. Soâ€¦"

"So it's mandatory stacks of cash. Got it."

Judy sighed inwardly. She'd seen this happen once before with only two cases, and everything took four hours to sort out. It was going to be a long Saturday if there was a lot of evidence.

"I'll be down there in about 45 minutes, okay Ben?"

"10-4. Try to put a rush on it, Bogo isâ€| combustible today."

"Good to know. Thanks Ben."

"Welcome. Bye!"

"Bye."

Judy hung up and glanced at Nick. The tension had completely evaporated - it was time for work. Time to be professionals.

"I'm heading down", said Judy imperiously. Feel free to help yourself to whatever you can find in the fridge, and don't feel shy about grabbing a shower. Just lock the door on your way out. She tossed him a spare key as she bustled out the door. "I'll see you Monday morning, Nick!" The door slammed shut.

"Yeah." Murmured Nick to himself. "See you Monday."

4. Chapter 4 - Tested

Chapter Four - **Tested**

ZPD, Monday, 0830

Nick leaned closer towards Clawhauser.

"It was really awkward. There was just this _huge_ silence, and then you saved the day with that phone call. And that's pretty much what happened", concluded Nick. Benjamin Clawhauser, captivated by Nick's story, shook his head, sending sprinkles flying across his desk. "From what you're telling me, it sounds like I shouldn't have called. It sounds like I interrupted something." Clawhauser's dulcet voice was tinged with guilt.

"Trust me", intoned Nick. "It was weird." Clawhauser smiled mischievously. "Only because you let it be weird. You two obviously feel the same way about each other. And, to be honest, the entire department has been expecting you and Judy to get together for _ages_. As a matter of fact, there may or may not be a betting pool."

A bemused expression crossed over Nick's face. "You're telling me that there's a betting poolâ€| and I'm not a part of it?!" Nick's mock outrage caused a pair of sheep officers across the atrium to turn their heads and stare for a moment.

Clawhauser's voice took on a conspiratory tone. "No can do, Nick. That'd be insider trading." The cheetah glanced upwards and boomed out a welcoming "Hello!" to Judy Hopps, who has just crossed the threshold of the front door.

"Hey Nick, hey Ben!" she called out brightly. As she reached Clawhauser's desk, the perky rabbit turned to Nick. "We should probably get changed soon, the test starts in a half hour." Clawhauser let out a small squeal. "Oh, I'm proctoring that! Just

between the three of us" â€" Clawhauser's voice lowered by a few decibels â€" "there are _twenty_ officers taking the exam today. Twenty! For four spots!"

Nick and Judy glanced at each other, and were both relieved that there was no awkwardness in the air between them. They both looked back to the tubby cat behind the desk and Nick winked. "Well, it's nice to have some good competition. I'd hate for this to be too easy."

Judy elbowed him in the leg. "Nick, be nice. C'mon, let's go get changed and meet at the briefing room."

Fifteen minutes later, Nick and Judy were standing on opposite sides of the hallway outside of the main briefing room, affectionately known as the bullpen to members of the force. "You know", said Judy, "I'm glad we got together on Saturday. It was nice to refresh on some of that old info."

Nick nodded. "Mmhmm." But every time he thought about Saturday, all he could think of was how it felt for Judy to be peacefully curled up with him on the couch. He shook himself out of his reverie â€" it was time to focus.

Clawhauser came plodding down the hallway. "Hey you two â€" I forgot to mention, they changed the testing room to Conference Room B, on the other side of the atrium." Nick looked between Judy and Benjamin. "Aha. So that's why we're the only people here." Judy let out a short chuckle. "Nice work, Detective Wilde!" Nick gave Judy a playful shove, and the bunny felt her stomach swoop â€" a feeling that had nothing to do with nervousness about the test.

The trio made their way to Conference Room B and entered. The room was the mirror image of the main bullpen, but was extremely handy when the precinct was busy, or when a special event was taking place (like a Detective's Exam). Save for Nick and Judy, the room was filled almost entirely with massive predators like lions, tigers, and bears. "Oh my!", blurted Clawhauser. "I'm running late! I've got to go grab the test forms, be right back!" He waddled off, whistling a jaunty tune. Nick and Judy glanced at each other, and then sat down together in the second row of tables. Quiet conversation filled the room as the assorted officers began to grow anxious.

The chatter in the room immediately died as the officers heard the foreboding thunder of Chief Bogo's footsteps approaching from down the hall. They all stood as Bogo entered the room, and sat back down at a wave from the Chief. Bogo adjusted his glasses and glanced down at a paper on his podium, then back to the aspiring officers. "Thank you all for applying for the Detective positions. As you well know, there are twenty of you and only four available slots, which means that in one week, sixteen of you are going to be very disappointed. How sad." The officers chuckled - they were senior enough by now to appreciate Bogo's trademark gruffness. Bogo cleared his throat and continued. "I want you all to keep in mind that much more than these test results are taken into account when deciding who will be promoted to Detective. Your records will be closely scrutinized, and your watch commanders will also have input on the decision. Good detective work takes skill, guile, and good fair judgment. My expectation is for you lot to make this an extremely difficult decision." Bogo looked up from his notes and gave a rare smile to the

room. "Good luck, officers. Clawhauser?"

The cheetah had reappeared at the door, breathless. He held thick reams of paper in his arms, which he deftly distributed among the applicants as Bogo stomped out of the room and returned to his office. After Clawhauser had handed out the last packet, he took Bogo's place behind the lectern. "Okay, everyone", he said in his effeminate tenor, "you have exactly one hour to complete the exam. If you finish early, place it face down on the table and leave the room." The rotund cheetah glanced up at the clock on the far end of the room. "You may startâ€¦ now."

So began a symphony of scratching pencils. Nick and Judy read the first question, glanced at each other, and broke into knowing smiles.

5. Chapter 5 - Blue Skies

Chapter Five â€" **Blue Skies**

Judy's Apartment, Saturday, 1900

It was Saturday, and Judy Hopps had been nearly sick with anticipation for the entire week. She had been trying to quell her anxiety by binge watching shows on Nutflix, but there were only so many episodes of Barks and Recreation and House of Carrots she could take before going crazy.

This led to Judy inviting Nick over to knock out the week's paperwork. The waiting game was always easier to play with a friend.

The partners were halfway through witness statements on a drug store robbery when Judy and Nick's phones vibrated simultaneously. Judy got to hers first, as Nick had left his on a kitchen counter. She glanced at the screen â€" _and saw an email from ZPD._

Judy, her hands suddenly shaking, skimmed through the email, and without warning rocketed to her feet and began bouncing to and fro in her living room.

"Nick. NICK! I can't believe it! We made it! Nick, we're both going to be detectives!" Happiness and excitement radiated from Judy in waves every time she hit the ground. Her eyes were wide with excitement, and her ears were perked up to their maximum.

In Nick's opinion, it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. It occurred to him then, for the first time in his life that he could remember, Nicholas P. Wilde was speechless - so he took Judy by the shoulders, bent down, and kissed her.

It was as though time stopped. They were suspended in a bubble filled only with joy, and each other. Though it only lasted for a quick second, both could swear it lasted an eternity.

Nick broke away, but Judy hopped up onto the couch, pulled him towards her and, with a blazing look in her eyes, kissed him right back. This time, neither of them made a move to come away for a long, long while. When the moment finally came, Nick and Judy looked deep

into the windows of the other's soul. No words needed to be said â€" what they felt was so plainly reflected in their partner's eyes that they both felt that had been blind so as not have seen it before.

Judy took Nick by the paw and led him wordlessly to her bedroom.

6. Chapter 6 - Afterglow

Chapter Six â€" **Afterglow**

Judy's Apartment, Sunday, 0730

Judy Hopps had never been so happy.

She woke up bundled in Nick's arms, with her head tucked snugly beneath his muzzle. His tail had wrapped around his nude torso and covered the upper part of her legs. She could feel the gentle rhythm of his breathing and adjusted her own to match, marveling in their oneness. She closed her eyes and smiled. Everything was perfect.

Unfortunately, she had to pee.

After carefully releasing herself from Nick's embrace, Judy wobbled slowly towards her bathroom. Nick, awoken by the noise and movement, smirked. "Having a little trouble walking, Carrots?" Judy turned back and gave Nick a half scathing and half gratifying look, but said nothing. Nick's smirk elongated into a voluptuous grin, and he raised his fists into the air in mock victory. "I am the Fox. I am the Legend."

Judy snorted and resumed her trek to the bathroom. "Don't flatter yourself, sweetheart", she called. Nick's ears perked up. "Oh, so I'm 'Sweetheart' now? That was quick." Judy's head popped ears-first from behind the bathroom door. "I could always go with 'dumbass', you know." "Ahh", sighed Nick in satisfaction. "That's better. I thought you were going soft on me for a second." Nick heard the twisting of a faucet and the sudden flow of the sink. "You would be an expert on things going soft, Nick" Judy teased. Nick lobbed a pillow at her and missed by a mile. "You wouldn't be walking funny if that were the case", the fox retorted. The noise of the sink ceased, and Judy emerged from the bathroom. She took a running jump and landed nimbly next to Nick on the bed.

Judy pecked Nick on the cheek, then leaned back. "We should have done this ages ago," she mourned. "So much lost time." Nick nodded and extended one clawed finger, tracing a gentle path through the fur on Judy's back, causing her to shiver. "You're right. We should have. But you know what they say, there's no time like the present." On his last word, Nick swept Judy up in his arms and pulled her close to him. "What I'm trying to figure out is why we never said anything to each other."

Judy busied herself by slowly massaging the back of Nick's neck. "I guess we didn't want to make things weird. Which made thingsâ€" weird. Talk about a self-fulfilling prophecy." The couple kissed then, and lay together peacefully for a moment.

"Nick."

"Hmm?"

"We smell."

Nick had no choice but to agree. He hopped into the shower with Judy, then after they had gotten dressed he helped her strip the blankets and sheets off of her bed.

"Just stick them in the basket for now, I'll get them in the wash a little bit later", said Judy. Nick complied, then made his way into the kitchen. "Make you something?" he asked as Judy entered the room. "Sure" she replied. "Surprise me. You've been doing really good at that lately." Nick grinned and started pulling ingredients out of the fridge.

Judy played with her phone for a minute, then addressed Nick again.

"Hey, you know what this means, right?"

Nick's reply was muffled as his head was buried deep in the bottom of Judy's fridge, trying to find some missing ingredient.

"What's that, Carrots?"

Judy grinned like a manic.

"We get to tell my parents that we're a thing now."

Nick started and banged his head on a shelf in the fridge. He swore loudly, then straightened up.

"I'm cool with telling your mom. And your siblings. But there no way I'm breaking the news to your dad. He's waaaaay to proud of his collection of fox-repelling products. Who mounts a Taser on their living room wall?"

Judy giggled. "You know he just did that to mess with you, right? He actually likes you a lot."

Nick was now deftly working a frying pan on the stove. "As a police officer? Yeah, sure. I can get that. But I don't think he's going to feel as peachy when he finds out that the darn shifty fox is screwing his daughter."

That comment was enough to elicit a sigh from Judy. "Well, we'll do it together then. When we're ready." Nick beamed at her. "That sounds perfect. In the meantime, I need to practice getting all of your siblings' names right. I think I've got almost all of them memorized by now."

Judy balked. "I don't believe you. There's no way you remember all two-seventy five!"

A smarmy mask appeared on Nick's face. "Oh yeah? Watch this. Kevin, Devin, Jory, Tory, Jenny, Juliana, Hazel, Holly, Heather"

Nick's rhythmic gumbo of rabbit names came to a halt as he laughed at the incredulous expression on Judy's face. "Come on, Carrots", he said. "The Detective's exam isn't the only thing I studied for."

"Apparently not", remarked an impressed Judy. "So what are we doing with the rest of the weekend?"

Nick winked at her. "Besides each other? I have every intention of spoiling you rotten this weekend. You better believe we're going out to eat somewhere nice. Definitely in Sahara Square. We're detectives now, we've got to up our level of classiness."

"Excuse me?" Judy appeared affronted. "I'll have you know that I have always been classy."

"Police officers aren't supposed to lie, Carrotsâ€| hey now!" Nick ducked as Judy flung a beanbag at him. "You're gonna need me alive if you want breakfast."

7. Chapter 7 - Dinner

Chapter Seven â€" **Dinner**

The Shady Palm Restaurant, Savannah Square, Sunday, 2030_

The warm, fuzzy feeling that Judy that had been consuming Judy all day disappeared, and was shortly replaced with anxiety and sheer terror.

There really wasn't any reason for it. Sunday had passed by in a pleasant haze of banter, hand-holding, and kissing. But somewhere in between receiving her drink and ordering appetizers, Judy had looked at Nick (who was sitting nonchalantly at the other end of the small table) and felt her stomach lurch.

She deliberately looked away and scanned the restaurant. The Shady Palm was one of the nicest restaurants in Zootopia that allowed walk-ins. It was nestled somewhere near the top of the gigantic palm-shaped skyscraper in Savannah Square. Though the building itself was a bustling destination for tourists, the Shady Palm itself managed to avoid them, catering almost exclusively to Zootopian locals.

The sun had already set, and the eatery was dark. Candles dotted the dusky dining room, adding a warm ambience and contributing just enough light for diners to see each other from across the table. The tables were close together, but far enough apart to allow prevent eavesdropping by other patrons. It was, in a word, intimate.

Just sighed inwardly. Intimate. That word simultaneously summed up the best and worst parts of her life at the moment. She looked back to Nick and laughed at a joke she had only half heard.

Today had started off as one of the best days of her life, but now she was worried. This bothered Judy â€" she wasn't a worrier, and typically left that to her sweetly overbearing parents.

As much affection as she felt for Nick, she couldn't help but start

to peek outside of their metaphorical bubble. While things might seem perfect now, that fact that they wereâ€| together was going to create some ripples.

It wasn't any one thing, but rather the gestalt of so many small yet important issues. She and Nick would be â€" or were? â€" an interspecies couple. That in itself wasn't so uncommon, but relationships between predator and prey still carried a stigma. It was usually limited to hushed whispers and snide comments, but it was still an issue that she and Nick would have to deal with.

Then there was the fact that they were partners. Could they even work together the same way now? How could Judy look at Nick without seeing the tender expression that donned his face during lovemaking, or without feeling the press of his body against her? Even if they could shelve those feelings â€" for ten hours a day, four days a week â€" Bogo would most certainly separate them. Not out of any prejudice or dislike of relationships between officers, but Bogo was an excellent Chief. He understood that his officers had to be absolutely sharp for the entire duration of their shifts, and that couldn't happen if they were ogling each other while trying to fight crime.

"Carrots."

"Yes, Nick?"

"Your foot is about to pile drive a hole into the floor, and it's a long way down from here."

Her right foot had been anxiously tapping against the ground at a mile a minute. Judy forced herself to be still as Nick gave her his signature cocky grin.

"I know I'm handsome, but really now. No need to be nervous."

Judy couldn't help but smile and, internally, agree. She couldn't judge Nick by typical bunny standards, but there was something about his eyes that was justâ€| attractive. It was the same thing with his fur, and his smile, and the way he sat lazily, and a hundred other things. Nick had also managed to somehow procure a suit for the evening, insisting that it was a vital part of their new "standard of classiness" â€" which Judy felt was an ironic statement coming from someone whose wardrobe was comprised almost entirely of slacks and Hawaiian shirts. Judy herself had been coaxed into wearing her once-used cocktail dress. Her consternation at having to dress up was mollified somewhat by the joy she took in making Nick help her put it on.

"You're really into the self flattery today, aren't you?" she said with fake coyness.

Nick's grin only got wider, and he took her paw in his.

"Well, I've had a pretty good day."

Judy paused, relishing the contact, but forced herself to pull away.

"Nick, we need to talk about this."

Nick's smile vanished, and his heart started racing. There weren't many phrases more stress-inducing than those that included the infamous "we need to talk." He knew, of course, what she was going to say, because his mind was preoccupied with the same thoughts. Nick remained silent, however, so Judy took a deep breath and began.

"Nick, today has beenâ€¦ incredible. But it's all happening so fast, and there's so much that might happenâ€¦ Bogo might split us up, and it's going to be tough to do this. Especially as a rabbit and a foxâ€¦"

Nick started to respond before Judy had finished talking, his voice coming out hurried, but sincere.

"I don't care about any of that. I can live with a transfer, because I want to keep seeing you. Like this, I mean. I know we've started really quick, but I want to work this out. I want to at least give it a good shot."

There was a pregnant silence as Nick tumbled to the end of his sentence. At some point, their paws had interlocked again, but neither party seemed to notice. Their waiter, a lithe panther, had approached with their appetizer plate but stealthily retreated when he sensed the import of their conversation.

Judy's response was to lean over the table and kiss Nick, though it didn't work out quite as smoothly as she had hoped. The table was slightly too tall for her to bend forward, so she had to stand slightly and awkwardly bring her face to Nick's.

She pulled away and smiled.

The waiter, sensing that his time had come at last, deftly swept forward with his plate and placed it delicately on the table. "Your fruit platter, sir. Ma'am." He padded silently into the darkness.

"Well", Judy said as she plucked an apple from the plate, "I suppose now we just have to figure out whether or not we tell people."

Nick gave a small bark of laughter.

"I vote no, for now. Let's give this some time, figure out the waters first. Besides, I'm pretty sure Clawhauser already knows."

Judy blanched.

"How?!"

Nick blinked and studiously ignored her question.

"...Let's just say I have a hunch. There's a reason he's so big. He's full of secrets."

The couple spent several moments in comfortable silence as they ate. Nick spoke first.

"I'm probably going to stay at my place tonight. I've got to do some

suit prep for tomorrowâ€¦ no more uniform for this fox." Nick sounded elated as he said it, but Judy knew how much he loved his ZPD blues. Not one officer on the force took better care of their uniform than Nick, though the condition of his uniform was often overlooked, mostly due to the addition of his aviators and his ever-present cup of coffee in his paw.

Judy nodded in agreement.

"Same, I've got to get my things together and finish doing laundry."

All tension had dissipated, and that magical warm fuzziness had returned to Judy. Everything was going to be fine.

8. Chapter 8 - Day One

Chapter Eight â€" **Day One**

ZPD â€" Bogo's Office â€" 0830

Even after all of her time spent in the ZPD, Judy always felt as though Bogo was looking at her through a magnifying glass. He also had a disconcerting ability to give off the impression that he could read your mind.

The meeting itself started off well enough. As they crossed the threshold into Bogo's office, he had shaken both Nick and Judy's paws (or at least shaken them as well as he could â€" his hands were as big as Judy's head) and guided them to the two seats in front of his desk, which were affectionately referred to within the ZPD as "The Danger Zone".

Bogo sat, then cleared his throat.

"Congratulations to both of you. I'm sure you must both be very excited about the results."

Judy beamed. Nick sat limply in an uncaffeinated stupor.

"I'm sure you both know Lieutenant Jorgenson. He's running the Detective Bureau, so you'll be reporting to him now. Your locker assignments will remain the same."

The massive buffalo shuffled the papers in front of him with surprising dexterity.

"That's it. Leave me alone. You're his problem now."

The two newly-minted detectives left Bogo's office, and headed to the south side of the building, where the Detective Bureau was located. Judy motored along with an almost literal skip to her step.

"That went great! I can't wait to get started. Where do you think Jorgensen will put us? My bet is on Narcotics. Or Vice!"

Nick couldn't help but smile at his partner's enthusiasm.

"I don't know how well we'd do with undercover or infiltration work,

Carrots. We're probably the most easily-recognizable cops in this city" he drawled. "Besides", he continued, "nobody would ever believe that a cute little bunny would want to buy meth off of them. You're all too hyper in the first place."

Judy shot Nick a playful glare and gave him a half-hearted shove.

"Be careful Wilde. I'm dangerous."

The duo finally arrived at the Bureau. It looked no different than the rest of the department â€" the similarity of everything made the gargantuan building seem like an endless maze, but Nick and Judy had long since learned to navigate it. The door was nondescript, save for a small black **76** etched into its midpoint.

Nick opened the door and ushered his partner through.

"Prey before beauty", he said with a smirk.

Judy's witty reply was lost in her throat as she took in the room â€" or rooms, rather. The open door led into a long hallway, which splintered into nearly twenty smaller rooms. At the very end â€" perhaps two hundred feet away â€" there was a very comfortable looking living area with a number of couches, a television, and a small open kitchen.

It was quiet, but alive. Murmurs drifted over the soft shuffling of paper, and was occasionally punctuated by a laugh.

Judy was suddenly overcome with nervousness. Her first instinct was to reach for Nick's hand, but she knew she couldn't do that here â€" so she settled for just looking at him.

The fox stood tall but slightly slouched, regarding the hallway with a half-lidded semi-disinterest. Judy felt a sudden calm overtake her, and her nerves settled immediately. They were going to do this together, and it was going to be fine.

Nick started down the hallway.

"C'mon, Carrots. Let's go find the Captain."

Judy hurried after him, glancing through the windows of the offices they passed. Small brass nameplates adorned the rooms â€" there were some names she recognized, but most were unfamiliar to her. Detectives and patrol officers rarely interacted once cases were handed up to the Bureau.

They finally reached the end of the hallway, and turned to face the final door on the right. The nameplate was weathered with age, and read simply:

****CAPT. JORGENSEN**.**

Judy knocked.

"Come in!"

Jorgenson was a lithe black panther whose age revealed itself in

streaks of grey throughout his coat. He had not let himself go to seed, however. Much like Bogo, he was all muscle and, if he wanted to, could go on patrol and be just as effective as he had been twenty years ago. His eyes were a rich amber, and exuded warmth.

He had been sitting behind his expansive mahogany desk, but leapt to his feet as Judy and Nick entered, offering them brief pawshakes before they all seated themselves.

The trio sat in silence as Jorgenson shifted through Nick and Judy's brief (but expansive) service records. After several moments, he glanced up towards his newest detectives.

"I'm assigning you two to Narcotics. You have relevant experience with the Night Howler case, and it'll keep you in the action. I wouldn't want to stick Bogo's favorite officers behind a desk forever."

Jorgenson was greeted by a pair of raised eyebrows, and he chuckled.

"Oh, the Chief loves you guys. Though I'm going to take a wild shot in the dark here and assume he hasn't smothered you with affection."

"â€|not quite", said Nick.

Jorgenson smiled lightly.

"If you're still here, it means he likes you. I'll have a case file ready for you in an hour or so. In the meantime, get to your office and settle in. You're in room 6. It's the third door on the left from the entrance. It's a bitâ€| bare right now, but you can start bringing in sundries this week."

He paused, then smiled broadly.

"Welcome to the Bureau."

Jorgenson rose and opened the door, which Nick and Judy took as their cue to leave. The Captain spoke once more as they crossed the threshold.

"Oh, stick this on your door." He handed Nick a small wooden case. Nick opened it to reveal a gleaming new nameplate bearing the words ****WILDE/HOPPS****.

When Jorgenson had described their new office as "bare", he hadn't been exaggerating. Not counting the fox and the rabbit, the office only had three occupants: a large desk (though not nearly as impressive as Jorgenson's), a rather deep closet, and a decaying swivel chair languishing behind the desk. The carpet was aged and faded, but the paint on the walls was fresh. Most importantly, the A/C seemed to work perfectly.

Judy and Nick loved it.

Nick immediately claimed the chair.

"This is totally mine. It was meant to be, it's perfectly

fox-sized."

Judy, as she had done thousands of times in response to Nick, rolled her eyes.

"That's fine! I imagine you'll be doing a lot of sitting, while the more talented and better-looking half of this team solves the crimes."

Nick gave a theatrical groan and collapsed onto the desk in a fake, dramatic death.

"Your cruelty has killed me, Carrots. Only an extremely passionate kiss can bring me back from the great beyond."

He rolled over until he was spread-eagled, face-up across the desk.

Judy strode to the window facing the hallway and pulled the blinds shut. She turned to Nick, and winked.

"I've always wanted to resurrect someone."

9. Chapter 9 - The New Normal

Chapter Nine - **The New Normal**

Judy's Apartment - Two Weeks Later - Saturday - 0530_

Judy had been awake for nearly ten minutes, but she was surrounded by warm fox and didn't want to move. She rolled over to face Nick and studied his sleeping face.

Objectively speaking, Nick was handsome. Perhaps not by bunny standards, but in Judy's book he was the most striking fox in Zootopia. There were angles to his features that simply didn't appear in the typical roundness of rabbits - it made him look intelligent and sharp. This was contrasted heavily by Nick's current state - his mouth was wide open and his tongue lolled off to the side. Judy giggled softly. Cute fox.

Then there was his smell. Judy had tried not to notice it before (in the name of professionalism), but she was always subconsciously aware of it. It was difficult for her to describe, but it was earthen, warm, and a tad spicy. In millennia past, that scent would have terrified her - but now it just excited and reassured her.

It seemed like nothing big had really changed. The humor was the same. They ate together and worked together, just as they did before. But so many little things had evolved in the strangest and most magical ways.

They would be cuddling and watching T.V. when Nick would suddenly exclaim "Burrito!" and wrap his arms, legs, and tail around Judy, leaving only her head free.

Judy would pseudo-romantically try to feed Nick with a spoon, but then pull a bait-and-switch and kiss him instead. She usually dropped the spoon.

Nick had developed an odd habit of opening doors for Judy. Though chivalry had always annoyed her slightly (she was an adult rabbit and could open her own doors, thank you very much), she didn't mind Nick doing it.

Nick was a gentlefox, though he would never admit it. And he was a good boyfriend.

"_Boyfriend_" Judy thought.

It was a label she had never thought she might use for Nick. Again, in the name of professionalism, she had buried her feelings for him deep, deep down - but being able to explore them with Nick was incredible.

They had started off fast. Maybe too fast - though it didn't seem like much of a problem. Through some unspoken agreement, she and Nick had both tapped on the breaks a little. Most of their personal time spent together was as it had been before, but now with overlapping personal space and much more casual intimacy.

Judy had been in relationships before, but none of them had felt like this. Not even the few that had gotten physical. There was always a layer of insecurity and awkwardness in those previous encounters, but there was none of that with Nick. Judy could say whatever was on her mind to Nick and (after a short bout of sarcastic teasing), he would take her seriously.

For all of their constant innuendo, the couple had only slept together once. It hadn't been mentioned, but it wasn't an uncomfortable subject - the time just hadn't seemed right to move further in that direction. Judy, for one, wanted to figure out exactly what they were before they ripped their clothes off again (though truth be told, she was greatly looking forward to it).

Judy sighed and let the thoughts drift away. For now, she was happy to enjoy Nick's company. And to tickle him mercilessly until he got up and started making breakfast.

Nearly an hour later, Nick stood guard over the oven as two tofu omelettes sizzled in a large pan. Judy was sitting on the couch, absorbed in her endlessly-growing email inbox. Nick gave a critical look at the omelettes - not done yet. He called over to Judy

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"Carrots, I'm starting to think you only want me for my amazing cooking skills. When are you going to make me breakfast?"

Judy's eyes remained on her phone as she replied.

"Trust me, you don't want me to cook for you unless you're looking to use up some of your sick days. Every time I've cooked, it's been a disaster."

Nick was incredulous.

"You're telling me that with nearly three hundred family members you never learned how to cook?"

Judy smiled.

"There were so many of us that I never needed to! There were always at least a couple aspiring chefs in the house." She finally broke away from her phone and walked over to Nick. "Who taught you how to cook? Mom? Dad?"

Nick's attention was focused once again on the stove.

"My mom. She taught me pretty much everything I know" - Nick paused for a brief moment - "well, all the good stuff, anyway. How to cook, how to clean. Never met my dad."

Judy was hit by a pang of sympathy. She let her paw drift to Nick's forearm and rest there lightly.

"I'm sorry, Nick."

Nick's features distorted in a rueful smile.

"I'm not. It made me grow up. It built character. And besides" - Judy noticed that his smile was now genuine - "if I _didn't _grow up in a broken home, I never would have met you!" He leaned down and kissed her, before straightening up to examine his handiwork.

"Ah! They're done. Grab a couple plates, would you?"

Judy obliged. As she rooted through a cabinet looking for clean dishes, her thoughts remained firmly fixed on Nick's family.

Everything Nick had told her about his mother had been overwhelmingly positive. Judy has slowly developed a mental image of Mariel Wilde, and though it probably wasn't terribly realistic (most foxes, as far as Judy was aware, did not have wings or halos), she felt that she wasn't that far off.

Judy had never met Mariel. Whenever she got onto the topic, Nick always managed to smoothly change the subject, and Judy let it go, aware that there were parts of Nick's childhood that he wasn't enthusiastic about discussing. For instance, he had brought up his muzzling incident once and only once.

Though Judy was understanding for the most part, it didn't seem quite fair. He had, after all, met her parents. Though he hadn't been to Bunnyburrow, he always managed to visit with Judy's parents whenever they made the long trek into the city. Though Stu and Bonnie Hopps had been skeptical initially (some habits take a long time to break, even if one is earnest about breaking them), Nick had inevitably won them over with his genuine heart and vulpine charm.

It was something she'd just have to talk to Nick about. But later - breakfast was about to happen, and Judy wasn't about to miss out on Nick's cooking.

10. Chapter 10 - A Stirring

Chapter Ten â€" **A Stirring**

ZPD " Nick and Judy's Office " Monday - 1100

Over the last two weeks, the dingy office that Nick and Judy inherited had been transformed into a strange and comfortable fusion of a rabbit burrow and a fox den. Some of the small pillows from Judy's apartment had mysteriously migrated into the office, and Nick had somehow managed to smuggle a lounge chair all the way through the ZPD and into the back corner of the office.

The budding detectives had replaced the original fluorescent light bulbs with special bulbs that glowed a soft orange, casting the office in a warm, earthy glow. The process had been perilous, requiring Judy to stand on Nick's shoulders, who in turn had stood precariously perched on the raggedy chair, which had been temporarily planted atop the desk.

The struggle had been worth it in the end, however. Nick, whose species was nocturnal by nature, no longer had to constantly wear sunglasses in order to shield his eyes from the glaring lights. Though Judy had no problem with light, she was able to appreciate the molten appearance of the new bulbs " she no longer found herself straining her vision after a long stint in the office.

The pair had started the day off slowly, finishing off paperwork from their last case: a moderately large cocaine bust that implicated several members of a Lemming Brothers branch in Little Rodentia. The scheme had been masterminded by the branch manager and a raccoon handyman named Basuro. The handyman, under the guise of fixing the building's air conditioning unit, rigged the system so that the entire top floor (here the executives worked) would dispense cocaine along with cooled air when the temperature was set below 50 degrees. The arrangement was discovered when the extremely high bank manager opened his window while the system was on and showered dozens of pedestrians with snow.

The case had been relatively open and shut " Judy had masterfully been able to coax a confession out of every suspect involved. All the detectives had left to do was attend the case in court.

Just as Judy stapled together the last evidence report, the door opened just a crack, through which Captain Jorgenson's head appeared.

"Wilde, Hopps. You done with that Lemming case?"

"Yes sir!" exclaimed Nick enthusiastically. The fox was sprawled lazily across his lounge chair, just out of view of Jorgenson.

Jorgenson smiled.

"Good. Come down to my office, I have something really fun for you two."

The door closed silently.

Nick turned to Judy.

"Do you think he means the normal idea of fun, or the Bogo idea of fun? I don't have Jorgenson figured out yet."

Judy gave a small smile.

"I guess we're about to find out. Get up!"

Nick groaned as he rose to his feet, and followed Judy into the hallway.

Both mammals blinked as they crossed the threshold â€" the warm glow of their office had given way to the harsh bright fluorescence of the ZPD hallways. By the time they reached Jorgenson's office, their vision had almost returned to normal.

The Captain sat regally in his chair.

"Close the door behind you", he commanded.

Judy let the door swing shut behind her and hopped into the chair next to Nick, looking at Jorgenson expectantly.

The panther slid a rather thin case file across the desk. Nick, being taller, grabbed it and brought it down to a level that he and Judy could both read comfortably at.

"This", said Jorgenson heavily, "is going to be an interesting one. I have no doubt either of you remember the details of the Night Howler incident?"

Judy and Nick gave each other a quick glance, then nodded simultaneously.

"Good", said the panther. "Because it just came back from the dead to bite us in the ass."

Judy was confused.

"But sir, we put that to bed ages ago. Lionheart and Bellwether are still in jail, and we managed to track down everyone on Bellwether's payroll. The lab is gone, and the mammals are gone. If there's anything left at all, I don't see how it has enough teeth to bite us in theâ€¦ butt."

Nick snorted at Judy's euphemism.

Jorgenson nodded.

"Normally I would agree with you, Hopps. But this case has convinced me otherwise. If you remember the wake of that case as well as I do, you'll remember our failed damage control. Precious few people knew what Night Howlers were before those incidents. But thanks to our wonderful friends at ZNN, millions of mammals found out about the plant."

Nick nodded knowingly.

"You were worried about Bellwether copycats."

"Mm." agreed Jorgenson. "We knew that eventually someone would try again. So Bogo and the union leaned heavily on the Mayor's office to pass emergency legislation, banning Night Howlers from Zootopia."

Luckily, we were able to locate nearly all of the Night Howlers in the city. The legal ones were easy, and Bellwether seems to have had the only illegal stash that we're aware of. Everything was either destroyed or confiscated for study. Which makes what I'm about to tell you very troubling."

The aged panther gave a weary sigh.

"There's a new drug on the streets. The dealers are calling it 'Blue Frost', and it appears to be a mixture of Night Howlers and some kind of opiate. It's not nearly as dangerous as those pellets that Bellwether was making â€" apparently it has a similar psychological effect as the Night Howlers. Users report a rush, feeling extremely 'free' as well as finding a connection with their more... basicâ€| instincts. Fortunately, whatever it's mixed with seems to keep them from going savage. They usually just rock back and forth and stare at the wall for three hours. But that's not what we're really worried about."

Judy suddenly understood.

"You're worried that someone has stockpiled Night Howlers. If there's that many of them somewhereâ€|"

Nick finished her thought for her.

"It's only a matter of time until someone a little more ideological than some drug dealers tries to get their paws on them."

Jorgenson's white grin clashed brilliantly with his pitch-and-silver fur.

"Good to know they still promote the right people around here. I'm putting you two on this case."

Both fox and rabbit swelled with pride, and Jorgenson looked at them fondly, remembering when we had been that young â€" excited and nervous about his early cases.

A moment passed and Nick spoke up.

"You said Bellwether's grow op was the only one you knew about. Couldn't there be another within city limits? There are a lot of places that only criminals would think of. Not that I would know anything about that."

Jorgenson's amber eyes locked with Nick's.

"We don't think so, not with the volume of frost we're seeing. If it was coming from within city limits, we would know. There's only one locale we can think of that can produce the amount required without raising attention."

A light went off in Judy's head.

"Bunnyburrow," she said.

"Exactly." Replied Jorgenson.

"Mendicampum Holicifius isn't completely prohibited in Bunnyburrow. I

believe it's used as a pesticide?" He looked at Judy for confirmation, which she gave with a quick nod.

Jorgenson continued on.

"So that's where you two are going. Hopps, you will make arrangements for you and your partner to stay with your family in Bunnyburrow. Your investigation will be under the guise of an extended vacation. Do not tell your family, Hopps. Casual clothes for the both of you, I don't want to attract any unwanted attention. There are plenty of foxes in Bunnyburrow as well, so Wilde won't have to worry about blending in."

The Captain leaned forward.

"The goal is finding the Night Howlers. Once you find them, the arrest should be easy. Howlers are still a Class 3 Botanical in the Burrows, and possessing over 100 plants in one location is a felony."

The panther leaned back in his chair and gave a lazy smile.

"Go catch me some drug dealers."

Judy was enthusiastic as she walked with Nick to the metro rail. Everything about this case was perfect â€" she got paid time off to visit her family, _and _she got to sink her teeth into a major case! Most of all, she was ecstatic about the amount of trust Jorgenson had placed in herself and Nick â€" letting them tackle a big case in their third week as detectives? Unusual, but he seemed to think they could do it.

Judy's head was stuck so high up in the clouds that it took several minutes before she noticed Nick's uncharacteristic silence.

"You okay, Nick?" she asked.

Nick gave a sigh.

"Yeah Carrots, I'm fine. It's justâ€¦ I don't know how I feel about crashing at your parent's place. We still haven't told them about us, and I still feel like it's too early to bring it up to them."

Judy's ears slowly deflated. She had completely forgotten.

"Ohâ€¦ right. Well, we don't have to tell them yet. We can wait."

She smiled and placed her right paw in the small of Nick's back as they boarded their tram. It was a small, innocent gesture that wouldn't earn them any ire from passers-by, but they both knew it meant much more than that. What was once small and unimportant was now intimate â€" it was strange, experiencing so many of the same things in such a different context.

The tram rumbled to a stop and Nick readied himself to exit. Nick and Judy lived on the same line, and almost always took the tram into and out of work together. Nick could have walked (thanks to his "tactical leasing"), but he enjoyed Judy's company too much to do so.

He turned around to face Judy as he swaggered out of the tram.

"I'll text you later, Carrots. Let me know if you want some help packing. I know you only have three outfits, so you'll need all the help you can get."

Judy yelled to him as the door began to slide shut in her face.

"I have four, you dumb fox!"

Nick was packed and ready to go within five minutes. He always travelled lightly — it was a skill one had to develop as a transient hustler.

He was able to fit everything he needed in a single backpack: a week's worth of clothes, some toiletries, and, after careful consideration, his sidearm. Firearms were unusual in Zootopia, and roughly ten percent of ZPD officers were authorized to carry them. Nick had obtained his certification shortly after he graduated the academy at Judy's demand. She insisted that they be certified for everything together. It wasn't that Nick minded the extra work (or the pay bumps that went along with the certifications), but he had to wonder how useful some of the extra training was.

In any case, he felt more comfortable with the gun safely secured inside his pack. He might know Zootopia, but there was no telling what could happen in the Burrows with millions (maybe billions, at the rate they reproduced) of rabbits. And drugs, apparently.

Nick shouldered his backpack and headed for the door. As he did, he sent a text to Judy:

Just leaving now. Still packing?

The reply was almost instantaneous.

I actually just finished. Packed some of your clothes as well. You need to start taking some of your crap home!

Nick smiled. They both knew his crap wasn't going anywhere. He typed back slowly as he navigated down the stairs.

Whatever. I'll crash at your place, then we'll grab the first train out in the morning.

The evening was like any other. Judy and Nick lay entwined on the couch, snuggling closely while they watched the latest Michael Bray film.

Nick watched mindlessly.

"I don't understand why everything in this script must inevitably explode."

The movie, of course, answered him with a loud explosion.

Judy mumbled something unintelligible and snuggled closer to him.

Nick smiled to himself and planted a tender kiss on the top of Judy's

head.

"You know, your parents are going to make us sleep in separate rooms. And who knows how long this case could go on. Days? Weeks? Months?"

Judy rolled in his arms to face Nick.

"Don't even joke about that. If we're there for more than a week, we're getting a hotel and making up a week's worth of snuggling. Besides, I'm more than capable of sneaking into my boyfriend's room."

Nick's smile was as bright as a sunrise.

"So I've officially made 'boyfriend' status, then?"

Judy hadn't even noticed that it had slipped out. She decided that cockiness was her best option.

"You're damn right."

_Ugh. _Judy thought. _That did not sound natural. At all. Now I get to look forward to being teased mercilessly for the rest of the night._

But Nick didn't say anything. He just kissed her, then gently maneuvered her so that she was laying horizontally face-down across his lap.

Judy giggled.

"Dumb fox. What are you up to?"

She couldn't see him, but she could tell from his tone that Nick was smiling.

"You'll see."

She started to feel his paws treading her back, massaging her sore muscles. It was heaven.

"Mmmm", said Judy. She felt like she was melting into the couch.

At some point Nick's paws had snuck under her shirt and continued to massage her back " but suddenly she felt something very different and gasped.

The sensation stopped immediately and Nick spoke, worried.

"Are you okay, Carrots? Didn't that hurt? I didn't mean to"

Judy interrupted him.

"You do that again. Right. Now."

The sensation retuned, and it took Judy a couple seconds to realize what it was.

Nick had extended the claws on both of his paws, and was gently

raking the fur of her back. She couldn't help but shiver against his touch. She couldn't help but feel a sliver of guilt over the taboo nature of what was happening â€" but how could something bad feel so amazing? As far as she was concerned, the bigots were missing out. Judy's mind started to wander. Was she the first rabbit to receive a claw massage from a fox? She had some Zoogling to doâ€|

She noticed that Nick's paws were starting to cautiously move lower. She made a soft noise of contentment to indicate her approval, and Nick continued.

Nick guided her onto her back, and leaned over her, looking into her eyes. A lone thought echoed far in the back of Judy's mind.

What happened to our clothes? I swear we were both wearing clothes a second ago. How did he do that?

Then Nick leaned down and gave the Judy the best kiss she'd ever had in her life. It was strong, but it was sweet. It was rugged, but it was gentle. It was the kiss of a predator.

Then they pressed together and everything seemed to melt into a blur of warmth, red fur, and Nick's wonderful scent.

She could get used to this.

11. Chapter 11 - Burrow

Chapter Eleven - **Burrow**

Judy's Apartment â€" Tuesday â€" 0800

There was nothing in the world that Nick wanted more than to lay in bed forever with Judy curled up in his arms. Unfortunately, he and Judy had both overslept by almost an hour, and their train was leaving in fifteen minutes, with or without them.

Nick rose from the bed, half-carrying Judy to the bathroom with him. As he turned on the water in the shower, Judy rubbed her eyes and made an adorably sleepy noise. At any other time, Nick would have found this irresistibly attractive and smooch-worthy, but they had to _go._

The pair managed to shower, get dressed, and brush their teeth. A mad dash to the train station resulted in the partners slipping into the train just as the doors slid shut.

Nick guided Judy to a bench and they sat down together. He deftly tucked their bags under the seat.

"Hey Carrots, you told your parents that we were coming, right?"

Judy, now fully awake, nodded.

"Yeah, I called them as soon as I got home yesterday. They're already made up a couple of rooms for us, so we shouldn't have much to worry about when we finally get there."

Nick was only half listening. What he really wanted to do was reach his arm around Judy and pull her a little closer, but the car was crowded.

Nick sighed inwardly. People's reactions weren't going to bother him â€" as a fox, he'd been looked down upon his whole life. Though things had changed quite a bit in the last year and a half (it turns out that being labeled as a hero and having your picture plastered everywhere was a good thing for your species), there were still plenty of mammals that distrusted foxes on principle. There were even more people that looked down upon interspecies relationships, and an even greater number of those opposed predator-prey relationships. Their justification usually contained the words "perverted" and "unnatural", which didn't feel quite fair to Nick. While Nick was actually quite certain the he and Judy were perverted in the normal sense, their relationship felt as natural as anything.

Nick didn't want to drag Judy into that spotlight unless he had to. So for now, he would just sit here, comfortably minding his own â€"

Nick's train of thought derailed as he felt Judy move over and lean her body against his. He couldn't help but smile.

Well, I guess it's into the spotlight we go, thought Nick. He lazily wrapped an arm around Judy's shoulders and pulled her closer.

-

The train ride was uneventful, for the most part. The odd couple attracted a few nasty looks, but they were in their own world together and mostly oblivious to any silent hostility.

The train slowed to a stop at the Bunnyburrow station. Nick and Judy hoisted their bags and headed for the exit. Nick held Judy's hand firmly in his, guiding them both through the crowd of larger animals.

Nick navigated them both to a bench, where Judy dug her phone out of her bag.

"My parents aren't able to meet us, so we'll have to take a Zuber. We might have to wait a bit, service out here isn't as fast as it is in the city."

Again, Nick was only half listening. His thoughts had become increasingly preoccupied with Judy's family â€" he had met them all before, of course, and they got along famously. But that was before he had started dating their daughter. Nick could actually see Bonnie going for it â€" she treated Nick like another one of her children, fussing over him and constantly insisting that Nick was underfed, sending him home with massive piles of food whenever he and Judy visited. Stu, on the other handâ€¦ Nick was pretty sure that Stu had only mounted the fox taser as a joke. But all Nick could picture in his mind's eye was that joke becoming reality, with hundreds of angry bunnies chasing him all around the burrows with OC spray and fox tasers.

He and Judy had discussed the issue at length, and had decided not to

tell her parents. It was just too early â€" they had only been seeing each other for a few weeks, and didn't want to rock any boats if things went south (God forbid). Nick let Judy continue on about the revamped Bunnyburrow train station, occasionally throwing in an agreement or passive observation. He was content with just listening to her voice.

Nick's thoughts were finally interrupted by a ping from Judy's phone.

Her ears perked up at the noise and she brought the device to her face.

"Looks like our ride's here! Let's find them and get rolling."

Nick smiled.

"Sounds great, Carrots."

-

About an hour later, Nick and Judy were walking up to the front door of the Hopps burrow. Nick was about to raise his paw to knock, but Judy scoffed.

"Nick, this is technically my house. You don't have to knock."

Nick faked an affronted look.

"It's polite! Where are your manners, Judith?"

Judy winced at the use of her full name.

"Judith? Are we really going to go there, Nicholas?"

Nick somehow managed to keep a straight face.

"We don't have to if you don't want to. _Jude the Dude_."

Judy's face registered shock, embarrassment, and then utter bemusement. Her voice escaped from her tiny in a very un-rabbit like hiss.

"_Who told you that name?_"

Nick's answer was delivered with his characteristic nonchalance.

"Oh, I've been texting your mother. She told me the legend of _Jude the Dude_. She also sent me some really adorable baby pictures. And by the way, I think it's precious that you wore your police officer costume to picture day in the third grade."

By the time Nick had finished speaking, Judy was turned as red as her partner's fur. She was going to have words with her mother later. Many, many words.

Nick opened the door for her.

"Prey before beauty."

Judy rolled her eyes and walked in.

As she crossed the threshold, her sour mood completely vanished, to be replaced by comfort and a sweet nostalgia. The front door led into a downward-sloped tunnel, which continued on for about thirty feet before opening up into a large common area.

Judy's family affectionately referred to this area as "The Lodge". It was huge and circular, with a dozen entrances and exits leading off into other parts of the burrow. The wooden floor was haphazardly covered with mismatched throw rugs. Tables were likewise scattered around the room with no apparent order (that had confused Nick at first, until Judy explained to him that having one dinner table for over three hundred rabbits didn't make very much logistical sense). The far side of the lodge served as a large kitchen. In addition to six industrial-sized refrigerators, there was an enormous freezer set into the floor. It was approximately five hundred square feet and accessed by a wooden staircase that was concealed beneath a sliding floor panel. Nick thought the same thought he always did when he saw the kitchen: business had been extremely kind to the Hopps family.

The Hopps family in question was currently swarming both Judy and Nick, extolling greetings and smothering them with questions and hugs.

From his first visit, Nick had been a smash hit with the smallest kits. The young rabbits loved for him to pick them up, and they constantly wanted to play around with Nick's fluffy, swishing tail. The slightly older children were constantly amazed by Nick's amateur magic tricks — the fox took a particular pleasure in pulling magic quarters out of her family's ears, and had a seemingly endless amount of patience with the smaller children.

-

After spending the better part of the afternoon roaming around the burrow with Judy's family, Nick was well and truly tuckered out. As he and the group of Hoppses he was travelling with once again reached the lodge, he tapped Judy on the shoulder.

"Hey Carrots, I'm pretty wiped out. You mind if I grab a nap before dinner?"

Judy nodded.

"Sure thing. I might follow suit on that one, actually. I want to be awake for food."

She shooed away the brothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews that had been following her around, and turned back to Nick.

"My mom said she made up a guest room for you. It's in one of these far wings —"

Judy led Nick back into the labyrinth of tunnels, finally coming to a stop before a plain wooden door with a worn brass handle.

Judy's face brightened.

"This is the one! So I'll see you later?"

Nick smiled.

"You know it, Carrots."

His smile then disappeared, and he glanced quickly down the hall. Not seeing anyone, he surprised Judy with a kiss.

"Sorry", he said. "Wanted to check if the coast was clear. Don't want to destroy any fragile bunny minds."

Judy leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

"It's too late. I've seen everything."

She squeezed his arm and walked away, venturing further down the hall towards her room.

Nick watched her go, and felt himself the luckiest fox in the world.

-

Nick awoke with a violent sneeze. It only took him a moment to realize why.

Judy was sitting next to him on the bed, holding his tail. As he blinked away sleepiness, she once again attempted to tickle his nose with its tip. He gently pushed her away.

"Well, you definitely win the award for 'most inventive use of Nick's tail'. Congratulations, I've never met anyone that sadistic before."

Judy grinned and kissed his forehead.

"I'll take that as a complement. Up and at 'em, sleepyhead. Dinner's ready."

Nick immediately perked up at the mention of food, and followed Judy back to the lodge.

Carrots were a huge part of the Hopps family's diet, but they had a bevy of other produce that was agreeable to Nick. Strawberries, plums, apples â€" there was plenty that Nick enjoyed. He could go a week or so without fish. Probably.

He and Judy sat alone at one of the many tables. Nick thought it strange that they were being given a wide berth by the previously enthralled kits, but then he spied Bonnie in the kitchen and it all made sense. She must have told them all to give them some space, which Nick appreciated. He loved being surrounded by so many enthusiastic rabbits, but they sapped the energy right out of him. It was nice to have a quiet moment with Judy.

Bonnie eventually caught his eye. She left one of the older children in command of the kitchen before hurrying over to the table where Nick and Judy sat. She greeted Nick with a warm hug, then gave him a

quick once-over.

"Nick honey, you're so thin! Eat up. We need to put some meat on those bones before you collapse on yourself."

Nick managed a sheepish grin.

"Aw, thanks Bonnie. But if you keep feeding me like this, they'll demote me and stick me behind a desk somewhere."

Judy kicked him underneath the table. She didn't like it when he poked fun at Clawhauser, even when it was in good fun. She loved that Cheetah.

The conversation was cut short, however. Something had caught on fire in the kitchen â€" black clouds of smoke billowed from one of the ovens and an acrid scent was spreading through the lodge.

Bonnie took off at a run towards the kitchen

"I'll see you two later!" she called out over her shoulder.

Judy was sitting on her bed reading when someone knocked on her door.

"Come in!" She called.

The door opened and Bonnie Hopps walked in, shutting the door behind her.

Judy smiled broadly.

"Hey mom! I didn't get a chance earlier, but I wanted to say thanks for dinner. And for letting Nick and I stay here, it's not often we get a week off."

Bonnie smiled as she sat down at the foot of Judy's bed.

"It's no problem, dear. I love having you two over, you keep the children from driving me nuts."

Judy giggled. It was true. But her mother didn't often make room calls â€" something was up.

"Mom, was there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

Bonnie nodded.

"How long have you and Nick been seeing each other?"

Judy froze. Her mind immediately went into damage control mode.

Oh god oh god oh god. There's no way she knows. That's impossible. Maybe it's a joke? I know! Laugh and claim ignorance!

Judy gave a weak chuckle.

"What are you talking about, mom?"

Wow. Really convincing there, Judy.

Bonnie gave her daughter a very skeptical look. The Mom Look.

"Honey, I'm your mother. I can tell."

Judy sighed. No way out of this one. Time to face the music.

"A few weeks. Right after we both made detective."

Bonnie reached out and took Judy by the paw.

"Judy, I just wanted to let you know that I'm happy for the both of you."

Judy looked up, surprised.

"Soâ€¦ you're okay with this?"

Bonnie shifted slightly and looked her daughter in the eye.

"Sweetie, he loves you. It's obvious, and to be frank I'm a little surprised that it took you two this long to figure it out."

Judy paused and looked down.

"Well, there was a lot to think about. Interspecies relationships are already tough, but the whole predator/prey thingâ€¦ it's a whole different ballgame. We're just trying to take it one day at a time right now."

She looked up again, back to her mother.

"I'm just glad you're supportive."

Bonnie just smiled.

"Always, Judy."

Judy smiled back.

"Mom."

"What?"

"I want a hug."

The two embraced. After a moment, Judy spoke up again.

"Mom?"

"Hmm?"

"Please stop showing Nick my baby pictures."

Chapter Twelve "Pillow Talk"

The Hopps Burrow " Tuesday " 2200
>

All things considered, Judy's conversation with her mother had gone quite well. Bonnie was supportive, and Judy wasn't going to be disowned for dating a fox. The baby pictures, however, were non-negotiable.

Judy sighed. You win some, you lose some.

She set her book down on her bedside table, and glanced at the clock. Most of the younger rabbits would be fast asleep by now, which meant she could talk to Nick without being interrupted. Before she left her room, Judy changed into a set of fluffy brown pajamas and a pair of matching slippers " the underground burrow was frigid at night. As well-off as the Hopps family was, even they couldn't afford to heat the entire burrow every night.

Judy shuffled down the long corridor, finally reaching Nick's room. She knocked twice and waited.

Nick answered the door wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. Judy looked him up and down once.

"Aren't you cold?"

Nick shrugged.

"Thick fur, sweetheart. Come on in."

Judy maneuvered past Nick and sat on his bed, then conjured a tablet from within her pajamas. Nick sat next to her and put an arm around her.

"Wow Carrots, we haven't even been here one day and you're already sneaking into my room at night? I know I'm irresistible, but this is just ridiculous."

Judy rolled her eyes.

"We need to talk about the case, Nick. And as much as I would like to have fun" " she punctuated the word "fun" by gently squeezing the base of Nick's tail, causing him to yip softly " "everyone in this burrow has incredible hearing, which would make things" awkward. And by the way, my mom totally knows we're seeing each other."

Nick's smile vanished instantly.

"Oh God. Please tell me she's cool with us. Am I going to wake up in the morning?"

Judy laid a reassuring paw on his arm.

"Relax, slick. She's with us all the way. We're going to hold off on my dad, though. Give this a little more time to settle."

She kissed Nick on the nose and his smile returned. He pulled her a

little closer.

"I'll take it. We'll need as many people on our side as we can get."

Judy gave a soft noise of agreement. She could spend the rest of the night leaning against Nick's soft fur. He was so warm—but the case beckoned.

Judy counted to ten and wrenched herself away from Nick's side.

"Okay", she said.

"We've got to start narrowing down the list of possible Night Howler suppliers, and I have a pretty good idea of where to start."

Nick nodded, looking at Judy seriously. The rabbit inspected the notes on her tablet and continued.

"We need to start narrowing things down a bit. There are over a hundred million mammals in Bunnyburrow, and I have a feeling we're not going to be able to question all of them this week."

Nick chuckled softly.

"Probably not, no."

Judy soldiered on.

"So we need to look for signs that people may be growing large amounts of these plants. There are three things that I think are going to help us: the Bunnyburrow Agricultural Registry, water bills, and electricity bills."

Judy paused and checked her notes.

"The Agricultural Registry is going to be our first stop. They keep a complete record of what every farm in the Burrows can grow, including Night Howlers. It's also the only place you can procure Night Howler seeds, and only after filing an awful lot of paperwork. You can only purchase female plants from the registry, which is the other way they regulate growth. So even if you ended up with a ton of plants, you wouldn't be able to breed more. You'd have to either buy more seeds or have someone from the registry pollinate your plants. We'll see who's bought seeds in the last year, and we can narrow down the list from there."

Nick interjected as she took a breath.

"Come on Carrots, didn't you see Jurassic Park? An all female population didn't exactly work in that movie. Life finds a way."

Judy glared at him.

"My foot will find a way into your ass if you interrupt me again."

Nick sighed.

"Touche. Keep going."

Judy cleared her throat.

"Once we have that list, we'll check the utility bills. Night Howlers are a thirsty plant â€" they require water constantly, otherwise they'll shrivel up and die. So we cross reference our seed buyers and check their water bills â€" if there's been a big spike in usage recently. Lots of water means lots of plants. The last thing to check is electricity bills. If I was growing large quantities of an illegal plant, I certainly wouldn't do it out in the open â€" I'd do it in some sort of greenhouse, which means artificial lighting. That jacks up the electric bill by a massive amount â€" we've seen that before back in the city with people who home grow catnip and opium poppies.

>We can pull utility bills via ZPD. All in all, it should take us the better part of tomorrow."<p>

Judy flopped backwards onto the bed.

"So what do you think?"

Nick grinned and shook his head.

"I think you're amazing, Fluff."

Judy felt her cheeks heat up.

"Well, we knew that already. What do you think about the plan?"

Nick lowered himself until he too was laying on his back.

"It's airtight. We'll at least have a few suspects to visit tomorrow, and it seems like we're heading in the right direction. We'll have to be careful not to step on any tails, though. My gut tells me this is a lot more complicated than just a couple of farmers growing illegal plants."

He sat back up again and maneuvered himself behind Judy, wrapping his arms around her.

"I just don't want anything to go south, is all. Don't want you getting hurt."

Judy leaned into his embrace.

"Oh, I'll be fine. I've got a big strong fox protecting me, what could go wrong?"

Nick chuckled.

"Famous last words, Carrots. Though I like being taller than all of our subjects for once."

He started to knead her shoulders with his paws.

"Are massages okay? Or can your family hear that too?"

Judy grinned lazily. Nick could have been a professional

masseuse.

"Massages are great. Though if you do that claw thing again, I make no promises about staying quiet."

Nick continued to work the knots out of her shoulders for a few quiet moments. Judy finally broke the silence.

"I've been meaning to ask you. Is that a common thing with foxes? The clawâ€¦ stuff?"

Nick was focused on working a knot out of Judy's upper back, and it took him a few seconds to answer.

"You know, I'm not really sure. To be honest, I'd never tried it before last night. I wasn't sure if you'd like it or not."

Judy gave a rather lewd giggle.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I liked it. I think my entire apartment building knows I liked it, too."

Nick let out a bark of laughter, then asked a question of his own.

"So I've got to know. How different is it being with a fox than with a bunny?"

Judy thought for a moment.

"Well, my experience is limited â€" keep in mind that I've only been with two bunnies before you. But it's short andâ€¦ passionate, I guess? Sex lasts about two minutes on average."

Nick's paws stopped treading and Judy's mind railed in despair. When Nick spoke, his voice was incredulous.

"Two minutes? You've got to be kidding me. You deserve way more than two minutes."

He kissed her neck.

"What else is different?"

Judy shifted and a blush crept into her cheeks.

"Well there's the uhâ€¦ obvious physical difference."

Something poked her in the small of the back.

"That physical difference?" asked Nick innocently.

"That's the one", Judy sighed.

Judy was conflicted. On one hand, she could have another night of mind-blowing sex with Nick. On the other hand, she was in a burrow surrounded by family members and would probably wake up at least a couple of them. Why was life so cruel?

Nick had extended his claws and was raking them down her back again.

She could feel the points, even though her pajamas.

"What the hell," she thought, and pulled her top over her head.

Nick continued to sweep his claws over her, but didn't just stay confined to her back this time. They passed over her shoulders, her chest, her bellyâ€|

Judy let out an involuntary moan and they both froze. The couple had been lost in a blissful bubble of joy, but had snapped back to reality as soon as the sound escaped Judy's lips. They both listened hard, and heard nothing except the pounding of their own hearts. The coast was clear.

Judy's heart sank, and she tried to suppress her urges.

_Not here, _she told herself. _Not nowâ€|_

She turned to face Nick.

"It's just one weekâ€|" she said feebly.

Nick smiled and embraced her.

"Oh, you're worth waiting for. Just do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"Don't tease me like this."

Judy gasped.

"_You _started this, Nick! Don't put that â€""

Nick interrupted her with a kiss, then whispered "Burrito!" and wrapped his extremities around her. Judy's faced was scrunched up in consternation.

"Let me go, you dumb fox."

Nick patted her head.

"No, Carrots. There is no escape from the Burrito of Love."

"I hate you."

"I know."

End
file.